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Redefining Mental Health for a 21st Century World

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Connected health is the talk of the health care industry in 2016.

It's an exciting time in health care with big ideas including the promise of technology's positive impact on care delivery. We are seeing improved health outcomes and we are redesigning the health care model to be more patient-centered, always keeping the focus on quality, accessibility and affordability. Yet, one of the most important questions related to connected care needs to be brought front and center: How can we reconnect the mind to the body, and ultimately integrate mental health with physical health?

I just returned from a meeting held in Germany that was attended by health system leaders from around the globe. Mental health was an important topic of discussion, and Kaiser Permanente was specifically called out as the best hope for creating a more integrated approach. I heard from many of those attending that if any system can show the world that linking mental health to the health

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care system can be done, it's Kaiser Permanente. I accept this daunting task and will engage the caring experts at Kaiser Permanente and then call on America and the world to focus on mental health. This is a global call to action – it's that important.

Nearly every person is impacted by mental illness through connections to friends or family. Here are a few facts from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), America's largest and most influential advocacy group on behalf of patients and their families:

One in four adults—approximately 61.5 million Americans—experiences mental illness in a given year, and one in 17—about 13.6 million—live with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression or bipolar disorder.

About 20 percent of youth ages 13 to 18 experience severe mental disorders in a given year. For ages 8 to 15, the estimate is 13 percent.

For homeless adults staying in shelters, approximately 26 percent live with serious mental illness and an estimated 46 percent live with severe mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

Approximately 20 percent of state prisoners and 21 percent of local jail prisoners have “a recent history” of a mental health condition.

Seventy percent of youth in juvenile justice systems have at least one mental health condition and at least 20 percent live with a severe mental illness.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, there is one death by suicide in the US every 12.3 minutes.

The entire health care industry needs to take a unified approach to mental health with the understanding that the mind and the body are irrefutably connected. At Kaiser Permanente, we have begun this journey to reconnect the mind to the body. While we have much work still to do, we have collectively put the stake in the ground on redefining mental health care.

I'm pretty sure your digital life is similar to mine. In our 21st century world, we are always on. We are connected to our digital devices at all hours and every day. Our work is no longer performed between the hours of 9 and 5. The pace of living creates greater anxiety for most of us, and that is before we factor in the systemic stresses of work and life that include race relations, the need for safer neighborhoods and increased financial stress.

Recently I've been thinking a lot about the state of mental health in this country. At Kaiser Permanente, we aim to redefine mental health care to be relevant for 21st century living. Making integral improvements requires a high-quality

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community of providers, emerging technologies that make it easy and convenient for members to connect, and evidence-based care with measured outcomes. By knowing what is working, we can offer even more support in helping patients achieve their personal health.

President Obama announced recently that he will form a task force to address discrimination in mental health coverage. I applaud this effort but believe we can make greater progress with the health care industry working in parallel.

Let's be clear – improving mental health care is not only an industry issue, it has become a critical societal issue. Our nation's ability to address mental health in a holistic, comprehensive way may just determine how successful we ultimately are in our quest to improve the health of America and the world.

Let me propose three broad goals over the coming year for industry and policymakers to consider:

First, let's increase the level of discussion around prevention and improve our ability within the health care system to recognize mental health issues earlier.

Just as we recommend a healthy diet and exercise to promote physical health, we ought to focus on the things we can do to keep our patients' minds healthy as well, and that requires that we think about what happens before the point of diagnosis.

Everyone deserves a health and health care system that seeks to understand and help us with any emotional or mental health concerns we have. This is true if we have been diagnosed with a mental health condition – or we are dealing with a serious medical condition, life stress, or we are struggling to find relief from milder forms of mental health distress. Every medical condition has an impact on and is influenced by emotional and mental health factors. Wherever we are on the mental and emotional wellbeing continuum, our health care team should seek to understand and support us.

Second, we must tackle and remove the stigma associated with seeking mental health care. Despite the progress we've made in so many areas, the stigma surrounding mental health remains a barrier to improving our ability to effectively treat patients. Often, the stigma prevents people from seeking treatment before the early signs like stress, anxiety or depression worsen.

Finally, we must address the shortage of mental health care professionals. The health care industry does not have a pipeline of mental health professionals to ensure we have the capacity to meet the expanded need for mental health care. Our organization has been aggressively hiring and, like others in the health care

industry, we have found a shortage of professionals available.

The mental health system must innovate to develop more effective models of care, especially for those with mild to moderate illness, who need the tools and support to care better for themselves. Technology may be able to support better access to mental health services. If we encourage the adoption of telehealth across the health care system, accessing mental health services from the privacy of your home may expand access for care while also making it easier for Americans to seek care.

My hope is that we recognize that the American and global health care system must deliver better mental health care.

Now I ask you: Do you – or does a friend, neighbor or someone in your family – live with some form of mental illness? It's something that touches many of us, and it will take all of us to reduce the stigma and reconnect the mind and body for the health of our nation and world.

Bernard J. Tyson

Chairman and CEO of Kaiser Permanente

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